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ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-167622>

Journal Article

Published Version



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Originally published at:

Frank, Michael C (2007). Photographing ghosts: ancestral reproduction and daguerreotypic mimesis in Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The house of the seven gables". *Litteraria Pragensia. Studies in Literature and Culture*, 17(34):40-57.

PHOTOGRAPHING GHOSTS: ANCESTRAL REPRODUCTION AND DAGUERREOTYPIC MIMESIS IN NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE'S *THE HOUSE OF THE SEVEN GABLES*

Michael C. Frank

*The years following the introduction of the daguerreotype in 1839 saw the emergence of two alternative discourses on photography: on the one hand, "photorealism," which equated daguerreotypy with a faithful mimesis of the visible and emphasized its unprecedented capacity for representing surface detail; on the other hand, the lesser-known "photo-fantastic." While the latter did not deny the new medium's great mimetic potential, it redefined that potential as the power of making visible the unseen. One of the most interesting examples is Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1851 romance *The House of the Seven Gables*. Connecting daguerreotypy with mesmerism – another form of arcane knowledge recently imported to the US from France –, Hawthorne fictionalizes photographic representation as a modern form of magic, able to reveal hidden aspects of reality. The daguerreotypes described in the novel give insight into the secret character of the person photographed, showing the charismatic Judge Pyncheon to be the modern-day equivalent of his ruthless seventeenth-century ancestor Colonel Pyncheon, and thus eventually provide a means to exorcize the ghosts of the past.*

1

The most decisive literary-historical development of the nineteenth century, Robert Louis Stevenson argued in an 1883 essay, was the "admission of detail."¹ This process, he went on to explain, had taken place in three stages:

¹ Robert Louis Stevenson, "A Note on Realism," *R.L. Stevenson on Fiction: An Anthology of Literary and Critical Essays*, ed. Glenda Norquay (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 65-71, 66.

"It was inaugurated by the romantic Scott; and at length, by the semi-romantic Balzac and his more or less wholly unromantic followers, bound like a duty on the novelist."² Speaking as a lonely romantic in a literary world entirely in the hands of naturalism, Stevenson deplored the alleged technicality of his contemporary fellow novelists: "A photographic exactitude in dialogue is now the exclusive fashion."³

What is striking about this passage is not that Stevenson employs the metaphor of photography to characterize the obsession with "exactitude" among the writers of his generation, but that he uses it to refer to human language – and thus to something that photographs, in spite of their much-vaunted verisimilitude, cannot in fact record. Stevenson's seemingly automatic recourse to the photographic metaphor indicates how much the notion of photorealism had become a *topos* in late nineteenth-century literary and aesthetic discourse. As several scholars have pointed out, there was hardly a text on realism after 1850 "that did not deal with the complicity or competition between art (literature, painting) and photography and in which the medium did not serve simultaneously as a model and a negative foil for realism."⁴ Whereas Stevenson's essay dismisses a mode of representation that the author considers as merely technical and unimaginative, earlier critics used the photographic metaphor approvingly, to emphasize a given writer's skill at achieving "reality effects."⁵ Hippolyte Castille, for instance, praised Balzac in 1846: "he describes an interior with as much exactitude as the daguerreotype;"⁶ and in the 1850s, German novelist Theodor Fontane likewise characterized Boz and Thackeray as

² Stevenson, "A Note on Realism," 66.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ Irene Albers, *Sehen und Wissen: Das Photographische im Romanwerk Émile Zolas* (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2002), 52 (my translation). See also Gerhard Plumpe, *Der tote Blick: Zum Diskurs der Photographie in der Zeit des Realismus* (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1990); Jilly Kelly, "Photographic Reality and French Literary Realism: Nineteenth-Century Synchronism and Symbiosis," *The French Review*, 65.2 (1991): 195-205; Philippe Ortel, "Réalisme photographique, réalisme littéraire: Un nouveau cadre de référence," *Jardins d'hiver: Littérature et photographie*, ed. Marie-Dominique Garnier (Paris: Presses Universitaires de l'École Normale Supérieure d'Ulm, 1997), 55-78.

⁵ For more on this concept, see Roland Barthes, "The Reality Effect," *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 141-48.

⁶ Quoted in Kelly, "Photographic Reality and French Literary Realism," 199 (my translation).

representatives of a “daguerreotypically faithful description of life,” in which “[e]very last button of the coat and the most hidden feeling of the heart are reproduced with the same fidelity.”⁷

In view of the well-known association of photographic mimesis with literary realism, it can easily be overlooked that the decades following the public announcement of Daguerre’s invention in 1839 also saw the development of an alternative discourse on photography, which I shall term the “photo-fantastic.” Far from equating photography with a “faithful mimesis of the visible,”⁸ this parallel discourse conceptualized the new medium in terms of romantic fantasy and interpreted it as a representation of the unreal and the transcendental,⁹ accentuating the “nonrealistic aspects of photography (spooky, hidden, surrealistic) that ha[d] been suppressed or repressed by contemporary photocentrism.”¹⁰

Contrary to photorealism, the photo-fantastic emerged in fictional works rather than in critical and programmatic writings. A particularly interesting example is Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The House of the Seven Gables* of 1851,¹¹ one of the very earliest literary responses to daguerreotypy. While Hawthorne’s romance does not question the mimetic potential of the new technology, it refuses to identify it with the mere reproduction of surface details. Instead, Hawthorne endows it with the capability of revealing the truth that hides *beneath* the surface. Through a “faithful mimesis of the invisible” the daguerreotypes described in the novel give insight into the secret characters of the persons photographed, revealing old sins and guilt, and thus provide a means to exorcize the ghosts of the past. Before discussing the photo-fantastic in Hawthorne’s novel, I want to begin by briefly recapitulating some of the major premises of early writing on

⁷ Quoted in Gerhard Plumpe, ed., *Theorie des bürgerlichen Realismus* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1997), 179 (my translation).

⁸ Albers, *Sehen und Wissen*, 337 (my translation).

⁹ Although it started in the period of Romanticism, this alternative reception of photography continued in the writings of such realist authors as I.S. Turgenev. See Renate Lachmann, *Erzählte Phantastik: Zu Phantasiegeschichte und Semantik phantastischer Texte* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2002), 295-333.

¹⁰ Cathy N. Davidson, “Photography of the Dead: Sherman, Daguerre, Hawthorne,” in *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 89.4 (1990): 667-701, 667.

¹¹ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables; Collected Novels*, ed. Millicent Bell (New York: The Library of America, 1983), 347-627. All further references in the text are to this edition (page numbers in brackets).

photography, for only against this background can the two-fold reception of Daguerre's invention in *The House of the Seven Gables* be accounted for.

2

From the start, photographic discourse oscillated between, on the one hand, a belief in the superiority of automatic reproduction over human agency and, on the other hand, the acknowledgment that daguerreotypes created certain ghostly effects. Accordingly, my juxtaposition of the photo-fantastic and photorealism does not intend to establish a rigid binary opposition, but rather to show how the two discourses overlap. The photo-fantastic can be defined as a shift of emphasis, in which the uncanny aspects of photography under-emphasized by photorealism were put to the forefront, leading to a redefinition of "realism" in photography.

Michel Frizot, editor of the 1995 *New History of Photography*, describes the birth of photography as a Copernican revolution.¹² For the first time in the history of the arts, Frizot writes, nature was no longer the passive object of representation, but *itself* produced its own mirror image through the effect of light on photo-sensitive substances. Man merely provided the *camera obscura*, into which he placed a prepared plate. In one of the first essays on daguerreotypy – an enthusiastic article published in the journal *L'Artiste* in 1839 – Jules Janin compared the new technique to the diorama, an earlier invention of Daguerre. Emphasizing the superior detail of the daguerreotype, Janin attributed it to the fact that the process did not rely on human agency – the artist's "trembling hand" – in reproducing objects: "And to think that it is the sun itself, this time introduced as the all-powerful agent of a completely new art, which produces these incredible works."¹³ William Henry Fox Talbot, the other great inventor of photography, chose very similar words to introduce the process that he termed "photogenic drawing." In the subtitle of a brochure published in January 1839 he described his technique as "THE PROCESS BY WHICH NATURAL OBJECTS MAY BE

¹² Cf. Michel Frizot, "Die Lichtmaschinen: An der Schwelle der Erfindung," *Neue Geschichte der Fotografie*, ed. Michel Frizot (Köln am Rhein: Könemann, 1998), 15-21, 16.

¹³ Jules Janin, "Le Daguerotype [sic]," in *Panorama, Diorama, Photographie: Entstehung und Wirkung neuer Medien im 19. Jahrhundert. Untersuchungen und Dokumente*, ed. Heinz Buddemeier (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1970), 203-209, 205 (my translation).

MADE TO DELINEATE THEMSELVES WITHOUT THE AID OF THE ARTIST'S PENCIL."¹⁴ According to these early texts, then, photographic reproduction was an automatic process – and this very fact explained why photographs were so much more precise than the work of even the most gifted artist.

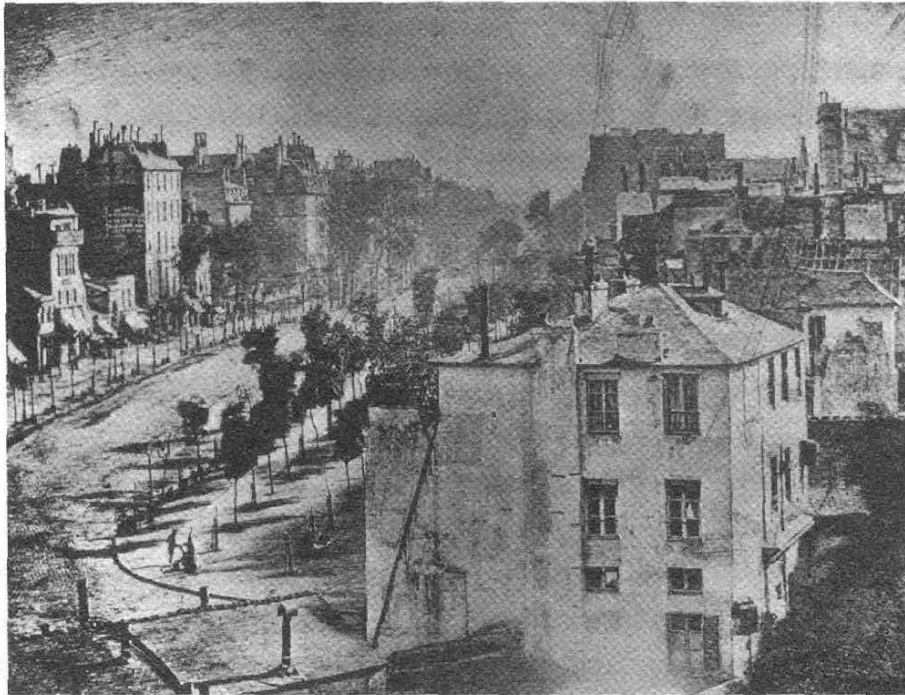


Fig. 1: L.J.M. Daguerre's "Boulevard du Temple" (1839)¹⁵

In March 1839, Samuel Morse had the privilege of being shown original daguerreotypes by the master, Daguerre, himself. He wrote down his impressions in a much-quoted letter that was published, soon after his visit to Daguerre's studio, on the title page of the *New-York Observer*. In his ekphrastic description of Daguerre's pictures, Morse begins by addressing the fact that they "are in simple chiaro oscuro, and not in colors."¹⁶ Having mentioned this, however, he immediately praises their exactitude: "[T]he exquisite minuteness of the delineation cannot be conceived. No painting or engraving ever approached it."¹⁷ Morse continues by registering another

¹⁴ Quoted in Floyd and Marion Reinhart, eds., *The American Daguerreotype* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1981), 13. See also the "Introductory Remarks" in William Henry Fox Talbot, *The Pencil of Nature* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1969).

¹⁵ Reproduced from Frizot, *Neue Geschichte der Fotografie*, 28.

¹⁶ S.F.B. Morse, "The Daguerrotype [sic]," <http://www.daguerre.org/resource/dagnews/1998/04-20-98.html> (01/05/2006).

¹⁷ Morse, "The Daguerrotype."

important technical limitation of the daguerreotypic process: not only does it produce black-and-white pictures, it also omits moving objects due to the long exposure time. Consequently, all horse-carriages and pedestrians are missing in Daguerre's "Boulevard du Temple" – the daguerreotype shows a ghost town –, with the sole exception of a single man who in the moment of exposure was having his shoes cleaned, but who nevertheless appears "without body or head because these were in motion"¹⁸ (see Fig. 1). And yet, Morse's description seems to suggest, this capital flaw is comparatively negligible considering the great amount of detail captured in the picture:

[...] a distant sign would be perceived, and the eye could just discern that there were lines of letters upon it, but so minute as not to be read with the naked eye. By the assistance of a powerful lens, which magnified 50 times, applied to the delineation, every letter was clearly and distinctly legible, and also were the minutest breaks and lines in the walls of the buildings, and the pavements of the street.¹⁹

The absence of bigger objects (such as vehicles and humans), it would appear, is more than compensated for by the presence of tiny details (such as letters on a distant sign). In this respect, Morse's description of Daguerre's picture is representative of the type of discourse that I have termed photorealism. In the abundance of details, many early viewers recognized an unprecedented mimetic potential, disregarding the a-mimetic aspects of photographic representation. Only because of this one-sided emphasis on detail could daguerreotypy become the epitome of the "reality effect" in literature and art. The photo-fantastic of Nathaniel Hawthorne and others, by contrast, was less interested in what was visible under the magnifying glass; it shifted the focus away from minute details to the more conspicuous – and often ghostly – visual effects of early daguerreotype images.

3

Nathaniel Hawthorne's interest in photography is part of the unparalleled – and accordingly well-documented – success story of the new medium in the

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ *ibid.*

U.S.²⁰ Hawthorne had been working as a surveyor at the Boston Custom House since 1839 when, in March 1840, a pupil of Daguerre arrived in the city. In public lectures, François Gouraud exhibited daguerreotypes, demonstrated the technical procedure, and sold the necessary equipment together with how-to manuals. Soon after, the daguerreotype business was booming. Between 1840 and 1860, 108 daguerreotypists were listed in the *Boston City Directory*.²¹ Hawthorne was among the first regular customers of the rapidly spreading daguerreotype studios, as several surviving portraits – the earliest of which dates from 1841 – show.²²

To understand Hawthorne's idiosyncratic treatment of daguerreotypy in *The House of the Seven Gables*, it has to be remembered that the discovery of photography in New England coincided with the introduction of a spectacular art of a different sort: that of animal magnetism, the phenomenon originally discovered (or should one say invented) by the German physician Franz Anton Mesmer.²³ In March 1836, exactly four years before the arrival of François Gouraud, another Frenchman, Charles Poyen, had come to Boston to familiarize the American public with Mesmer's teachings.²⁴ In the 1830s – half a century after the mesmerism craze of Paris, when dozens of patients daily attended Mesmer's group séances – animal magnetism was a dying art in Europe. Yet, despite initial skepticism, the American public proved susceptible to the spiritualism of Mesmer's self-declared heirs.

²⁰ Apart from the already-quoted study by Reinhart and Reinhart, *The American Daguerreotype*, see Robert Taft, *Photography and the American Scene: A Social History, 1839-1889* [1938] (New York: Dover, 1964); Beaumont Newhall, *The Daguerreotype in America* [1961], 3rd, rev. ed. (New York: Dover, 1976); Richard Rudisill, *Mirror Image: The Influence of the Daguerreotype on American Society* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1971); William Welling, *Photography in America: The Formative Years, 1839-1900* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1978); John Wood, *America and the Daguerreotype* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 1991).

²¹ Cf. Carol Schloss, *In Visible Light: Photography and the American Writer, 1840-1940* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 31.

²² Cf. Schloss, *In Visible Light*, 26f.

²³ On Mesmer and animal magnetism, see Robert Darnton, *Mesmerism and the End of the Enlightenment in France* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968); Maria M. Tatar, *Spellbound: Studies on Mesmerism and Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978); Frank A. Pattie, *Mesmer and Animal Magnetism: A Chapter in the History of Medicine* (Hamilton, NY: Edmonston Pub., 1995).

²⁴ Cf. Eric T. Carlson, "Charles Poyen Brings Mesmerism to America," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, 15 (1960): 121-32.

During his 1837 tour through New England, Charles Poyen also visited Hawthorne's hometown Salem, Massachusetts. Among his listeners was the dental assistant to Dr. Peabody, the father of Hawthorne's future wife Sophia. Having heard Poyen's talk, this young doctor became so convinced that he too possessed mesmerist healing powers that he offered to help cure Sophia of her chronic headaches.²⁵ Hawthorne was horrified by the news. His letter to Sophia shows that even if he rejected mesmerism as a pseudoscience, he did not doubt that mesmerists could exercise some kind of "power" upon their medium, "of which we know neither the origin nor the consequence."²⁶ "Supposing that this power arises from the transfusion of one spirit into another," he warned Sophia, "it seems to me that the sacredness of an individual is violated by it; there would be an intrusion into thy holy of holies."²⁷ This passage describes mesmerism-induced trance as a form of non-physical rape. For Hawthorne, whoever controls or even manipulates another person by means of telepathy undermines that person's autonomy as a subject and thereby commits an unpardonable sin. In spite (or perhaps because) of Hawthorne's great contempt for mesmerism, the possibility of such manipulation still took a strong hold of his imagination.

Hawthorne was not the only author of the nineteenth century to recognize the uncanny appeal of mesmerism and to exploit it in the form of fantastic texts.²⁸ What distinguishes him from other French, German, English, and American writers dealing with the same topic, however, is that he linked his notion of animal magnetism (as a kind of "penetration" of the mind) with the more recent art of daguerreotypic reproduction. Even though Hawthorne's treatments of mesmerism and daguerreotypy have repeatedly been the subject of scholarly investigation,²⁹ the inextricable connection between the two phenomena in *The House of the Gables* is usually overlooked.

²⁵ Cf. Samuel Chase Coale, *Mesmerism and Hawthorne: Mediums of American Romance* (Tuscaloosa, AL and London: The University of Alabama Press, 1998), 9.

²⁶ Quoted in Tatar, *Spellbound*, 205.

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ For a discussion of mesmerism in English and American literature, see Tatar, *Spellbound*. For additional examples from German and French literature, see Jürgen Barkhoff, *Magnetische Fiktionen: Literarisierung des Mesmerismus in der Romantik* (Stuttgart and Weimar: Metzler, 1995) and Lachmann, *Erzählte Phantastik*, 153-94.

²⁹ On mesmerism in Hawthorne, see Tatar, *Spellbound*, 189-217; Coale, *Mesmerism and Hawthorne*. On the theme of daguerreotypy in *The House of the Seven Gables*, see Schloss, *In Visible Light*, 25-53; Davidson, "Photography of the Dead;" Alan Trachtenberg, "Seeing and Believing: Hawthorne's Reflections on the Daguerreotype

Significantly, Hawthorne's male protagonist Holgrave is a practitioner of both techniques – and the novel's heavy emphasis on the influence of genealogy and heredity suggests that he practices them as "black arts." As is revealed in the end of the novel, Holgrave is the only remaining descendant of the seventeenth-century carpenter Matthew Maule, a "reputed wizard" (358) hanged for sorcery in the time of the Puritan witch-hunts. Two hundred years after this fateful event, Holgrave has returned to his forefather's land, renting a room in the house of the Pyncheon family. Colonel Pyncheon, a powerful aristocrat, was one of the New Englanders responsible for the murder of Matthew Maule, whose property he coveted. Well aware of Pyncheon's true motive, Maule cursed him from the platform of the gallows, prophesying that God would give him "blood to drink." Unmoved, the Colonel hired Maule's son to build the Pyncheon house on his late father's land. Soon after the completion of the edifice, the Colonel was found dead in the parlor with blood in his beard. The histories of the two unequal families have remained entangled ever since – one descendant of the wizard after the other allegedly practicing magic against the Pyncheons, whose house was increasingly haunted by ghostly phenomena –, but the Maules have never been compensated for the theft of their territory.

When the plot begins, the now decrepit house with the seven gables is inhabited by the equally decrepit Hepzibah Pyncheon, an impoverished patrician lady forced to let a room and open a grocery store in order to survive. The house is owned by her relative, Judge Jaffrey Pyncheon who, like the heartless Colonel, has brought guilt upon himself out of greed: when his uncle died the same way as the Colonel, the Judge unjustly charged his cousin Clifford, the rightful heir, with murder. In the first half of the novel, Clifford is released from prison, a physically and psychically broken man.

Holgrave – who conceals his true identity – is Hepzibah Pyncheon's lodger and thus a constant reminder of her humiliating social decline. The conservative lady and the radical reformer are exact opposites, but Hepzibah acknowledges that the young man has "a way of taking hold of one's mind" (425). Hepzibah's beautiful young cousin Phoebe, who also stays in the house, even feels a strange influence emanating from Holgrave: "She

in *The House of the Seven Gables*," *National Imaginaries, American Identities: The Cultural Work of American Iconography*, ed. Larry J. Reynolds and Gordon Hutner (Princeton, NJ, and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000), 30-51; Lara Langer Cohen, "What's Wrong with this Picture? Daguerreotypy and Magic in *The House of the Seven Gables*," *Arizona Quarterly*, 59.1 (2004): 39-69.

rebelled, as it were, against a certain magnetic element in the artist's nature, which he exercised towards her, possibly without being conscious of it" (433).

Although Hawthorne does not draw an explicit analogy between animal magnetism and daguerreotypy, there are repeated hints in the novel that both practices have the power to reveal hidden aspects of a person's identity. The most important indication of this is found in the passage describing a magic mirror said to contain reflections of all members of the Pyncheon family who ever stood before it. It is a kind of palimpsestic archive of images, an artificial memory. Hawthorne borrows this idea from early writings on daguerreotypy that explained the photographic process as a fixation of mirror images on sensitized metal plates. Whereas in France, the already-quoted Jules Janin introduced the daguerreotype as a "mirror that preserves all impressions,"³⁰ the first article on daguerreotypy published in the United States – N.P. Willis's "The Pencil of Nature" of the same year – was even more emphatic: "The real black art of true magic arises and cries avant. [...] What would you say to looking in a mirror and having the image fastened!!"³¹ Hawthorne's novel takes the uncanny idea of a permanent mirror image one step further. For the Pyncheons mirror does not simply display ordinary portraits. Rather than showing poses of people presenting themselves the way they want to be seen, the mirror reflects the *secret* character of the family Pyncheon, carefully concealed from public scrutiny:

[...] there was a story [...] that the posterity of Matthew Maule had some connection with the mystery of the looking-glass, and that – by what appears to have been a sort of mesmeric process – they could make its inner region all alive with the departed Pyncheons; not as they had shown themselves to the world, nor in their better and happier hours, but as doing over again some deed of sin, or in the crisis of bitterest sorrow.

(368)

The magic mirror in the house erected by Matthew Maule's son turns out to be a multiple-layered daguerreotype. Using their mesmeric faculty to read another person's mind – and thus to discover his or her true character –, the

³⁰ Janin, "Le Daguerotype," 207 (my translation).

³¹ Quoted in Cohen, "What's Wrong with this Picture?," 49f.

descendants of Matthew Maule have apparently transferred this ability to the looking-glass. In a quasi-photographic process, the unseen has thereby been made visible – and fixed.

A very similar effect is achieved in Holgrave's picture of Judge Pyncheon. When Holgrave offers Phoebe to show her the portrait, she expresses a general dislike for daguerreotypes:

I don't much like pictures of that sort – they are so hard and stern; besides dodging away from the eye, and trying to escape altogether. They are conscious of looking very unamiable, I suppose, and therefore hate to be seen.

(430)

As Alan Trachtenberg has demonstrated, this passage echoes a common reservation against the photographic process that also manifested itself in other American writings of the period.³² Phoebe's observation that daguerreotype portraits seem animated – the photographed person shunning the light in a ghost-like fashion – can be explained by the chemical nature of original daguerreotypes, as Cathy N. Davidson reminds us: "the mirrored plate contained, simultaneously, a positive and negative image [...]. The image is uncanny: tilt it one way, and you see the lateral reverse of the positive image; tilt it another and the images, the light and the dark, are reversed."³³ Furthermore, because the plates were mirrored, daguerreotypes eerily reflected the viewer's face when held at eye level.³⁴ To this one can add a third uncanny effect: if the faces on early daguerreotype portraits seem either stern or strangely evanescent (as if dematerializing before one's eyes), this is due to the long exposure time obliging the sitter to remain immobile for several minutes in order to achieve a sharp image.

Contrary to Samuel Morse and many other contemporary commentators on photography, then, Hawthorne highlights the defamiliarizing effects of daguerreotype images. Crucially, however, he does not characterize these effects as amimetic. In *The House of the Seven Gables*, it is the daguerreotype's very deviance from our common experience of reality that is said to reveal

³² Cf. Alan Trachtenberg, "Mirror in the Marketplace: American Responses to the Daguerreotype, 1839-1851," *The Daguerreotype: A Sesquicentennial Celebration*, ed. John Wood (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co., 1989), 60-73.

³³ Davidson, "Photography of the Dead," 681.

³⁴ Cf. *ibid.*

the truth behind what only *appears* to be reality. Holgrave explains: "There is a wonderful insight in heaven's broad and simple sunshine. While we give it credit only for depicting the merest surface, it actually brings out the secret character with a truth that no painter would ever venture upon, even could he detect it" (430). He continues:

Now, the remarkable point is, that the original wears, to the world's eye – and, for aught I know, to his most intimate friends – an exceedingly pleasant countenance, indicative of benevolence, openness of heart, sunny good humor, and other praiseworthy qualities of that cast. The sun, as you see, tells quite another story, and will not be coaxed out of it, after half-a-dozen patient attempts on my part. Here we have the man, sly, subtle, hard, imperious, and, withal, cold as ice. Look at that eye! Would you like to be at its mercy? At that mouth! Could it ever smile? And yet, if you could only see the benign smile of the original! It is so much the more unfortunate, as he is.

(431)

4

Like the picture of Dorian Gray, the daguerreotype portrait of Judge Pyncheon reveals the discrepancy between being and appearance. At the same time it shows him to be the present day equivalent of his evil forefather: Phoebe first thinks that she recognizes Colonel Pyncheon in the daguerreotype of the judge. Hawthorne here adopts the tradition of the Gothic novel. In the founding text of the genre, *The Castle of Otranto*, Horace Walpole creates a similar analogy between mimetic representation and ancestral reproduction – reproduction meaning the passing on not only of physical features and character traits, but also of family guilt from one generation to the next. The moral of the tale, Walpole explains in the original preface to his book (which he presents as an authentic medieval manuscript translated from the Italian), is that "*the sins of the fathers are visited on their children to the third and fourth generation.*"³⁵ In Walpole's 1764 romance, it is Manfred – the heir of the murderer and usurper Ricardo – who has to pay

³⁵ Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto*, ed. W.S. Lewis (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 7 (Walpole's emphasis).

for the unacknowledged guilt of his ancestor. The novel's climax is prepared by the quasi-return of the rightful owner of the castle, Alfonso the Good, in the person of his last descendant, Theodore. Although this latter's true identity remains unknown to the other protagonists until the end of the novel, it is suggested by his "exact resemblance"³⁶ to the painted portrait of Alfonso. By surviving the persons represented in them, Walpole implies, portraits metaphorically create "ghosts." But even outside of these artificially produced doubles, the dead sometimes continue to exist, in a more literal sense, by means of natural reproduction. When in *The Castle of Otranto* the two "copies" of the original appear at the same time, this creates an uncanny effect: Seeing Theodore in Alfonso's armor, Manfred believes that he faces a "dreadful spectre," a "ghastly phantom" which "unhinge[s] [his] soul."³⁷

The House of the Seven Gables mirrors the pattern of Walpole's plot. Here too it is the "revenant" of a treacherously murdered ancestor who exacts retribution from the descendants of the perpetrator. Hawthorne's novel shares the same obsession with the inescapable influence of heredity, the impossibility of cutting oneself off from the (family) past. As Mikhail Bakhtin has argued, the chronotope characteristic of the Gothic novel is the castle dating from the feudal era, a place "saturated through and through with a time that is historical in the narrow sense of the word, that is, the time of the historical past."³⁸ In such a castle – and the same is true for Hawthorne's house of the seven gables – "the traces of centuries and generations are arranged [...] in visible form."³⁹ Historical time is literally given shape in "various parts of [the castle's] architecture, in furnishings, weapons, the ancestral portrait gallery, the family archives and in the particular human relationships involving dynastic primacy and the transfer of hereditary rights."⁴⁰ There is a notable difference between Hawthorne's mid-nineteenth-century romance and the early Gothic novel, however. Unlike *The Castle of Otranto*, *The House of the Seven Gables* does not use ancestral portraits as media for the mere *preservation* of the past; rather,

³⁶ Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto*, 54.

³⁷ *ibid.*, 83.

³⁸ Mikhail Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes toward a Historical Poetics," *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 84-258, 245f.

³⁹ Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel," 246.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

Holgrave's daguerreotypes offer a means of *re-presencing* the past, of reactivating it from a state of latency – and invisibility.

5

In a stimulating essay on the relationship between photography and literary realism, Philippe Ortel argues that by 1850, realist fiction and the daguerreotype had established a common "frame of reference."⁴¹ This frame of reference, Ortel maintains, consisted in a shared concept of reality which privileged the visible: The real was equated with the *champ visuel*. This fact, Ortel goes on to argue, intensified the competition between the two media literature and photography, and thus the anti-photographic polemics on the part of the proponents of literary realism. The romantic Victor Hugo, on the other hand, did not hesitate to express his great enthusiasm for the new medium, because – as Ortel has it – "the frame of reference of his poetry was precisely different from that constructed by the new image: [...] the Romantic frame of reference [...] made of the invisible the place of Truth and thus of the Real."⁴²

This simple dichotomy between two frames of reference – the realist and the romantic – and two sites of the real – the visible and the invisible – is certainly tempting, the more so because Hawthorne's novel seems to confirm Ortel's generalization. After all, Hawthorne makes it very explicit that Judge Pyncheon conceals his true character and that the "reality" about his personality thus remains unseen. Yet, it becomes equally obvious from the novel that it is only after the invisible aspects of Pyncheon's personality have been made visible and permanently fixed in an image that the "reality" of his identity can be recognized as such. Like the mesmerist photo-mirror conceived by his ancestors, Holgrave's daguerreotype portraits accomplish a magical mimesis, in the course of which the hidden aspects of the portrayed individual's character are brought to light (i.e., exteriorized). The plot needs this visual evidence for its happy resolution. In this sense, Hawthorne's novel can be said to belong to both frames of reference outlined by Ortel.

By combining the black arts of mesmerism and daguerreotypy, Holgrave creates pictures that show the genetic and moral burden weighing on the family Pyncheon. But what exactly are the relationships between Holgrave

⁴¹ Cf. Ortel, "Réalisme photographique, réalisme littéraire," 61-72.

⁴² *ibid.*, 64 (my translation).

and Matthew Maule, Judge Pyncheon and the “stern Puritan”? “[In] this long drama of wrong and retribution,” Holgrave declares towards the end of the novel, “I represent the old wizard, and am probably as much a wizard as ever he was” (624). At first sight, this sentence seems to suggest that the confrontation between Holgrave and Judge Pyncheon is a mere repetition of the original confrontation between their two ancestors. According to such a reading, Holgrave is nothing but a photographing ghost photographing the ghost of Pyncheon, a kind of avenging angel with a camera instead of a sword, as Alan Trachtenberg puts it.⁴³ At second sight, however, Holgrave’s revelation turns out to be far more ambiguous. He does not ‘embody’ but ‘represent’ the old wizard (who may or may not have been endowed with witchcraft) and simply claims for his family what rightfully belongs to it, thereby releasing both the Pyncheons and himself from a ghostly repetitive ‘drama’ that has tied the destinies of the families together for more than two hundred years.

Even though, in an early authorial comment, Hawthorne identifies his novel as the “history of retribution for the sin of long ago” (386), the concept of hereditary sin is only one of three possible interpretations offered by the text. The second explanation leads back to the curse of wizard Maule, whose prophecy that God would give the original Pyncheon “blood to drink” is fulfilled more than once in the history of the Pyncheon family, first the judge’s uncle and then the judge himself dying the same death. Both of these explanations are metaphysical. *The House of the Seven Gables*, however, does not belong to the genre of the marvelous. For – true to Tzvetan Todorov’s observation that the fantastic typically “oblige[s] the reader [...] to hesitate between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events described”⁴⁴ – the novel takes a different turn. In the course of the plot, the metaphysical explanations suggesting supernatural events are increasingly superseded by a third, scientific possibility. In the end we are told that the ghostly return of Colonel Pyncheon and the uncanny repetition of his manner of death derive from a “physical predisposition in the Pyncheon race” (612) – a ‘curse’ of a different kind. It is implied that the wizard Maule possibly knew of this hereditary disease in the Pyncheon family when he spoke his curse.

⁴³ Cf. Trachtenberg, “Seeing and Believing,” 37.

⁴⁴ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Cleveland and London: The Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1973), 33.

The notion that the evil character of Judge Pyncheon can be read in his face – and that it can accordingly be captured in a photograph – seems to anticipate Cesare Lombroso's criminological theory of the later nineteenth century. As is well known, Lombroso postulated in 1876 that "born criminals" could be identified, among other criteria, by the observable "anomalies" in their physiognomy, each characteristic feature (such as salient cheekbones, earlobes, eyebrows, etc.) being the visible index of an invisible, innate nature.⁴⁵ The so-called *Atlas* accompanying Lombroso's *Criminal Man* contained several series of photographs of supposedly typical male and female delinquents (see Fig. 2). On the basis of these samples, Lombroso held, the reader would be able to identify other representatives of the "types" emerging from the photographs.



Fig. 2: "Types of Murderers"⁴⁶

Hawthorne's novel is in line with the neo-Darwinian view on hereditary determinism that informed the works of Émile Zola and other writers of the *fin de siècle*. In *The House of the Seven Gables*, the notion of such determinism is

⁴⁵ Cf. Cesare Lombroso, *Criminal Man*, trans. Mary Gibson and Nicole Hahn Rafter (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2006).

⁴⁶ Reproduced from Cesare Lombroso, *L'uomo delinquente in rapporto all'antropologia, alla giurisprudenza ed alla psichiatria*. *Atlante*, 5th ed. (Torino: Fratelli Bocca Editori, 1897), plate XLL.

reinforced (though in a rather opaque way) by the portrait Holgrave takes of Jaffrey Pyncheon after his death. As Lara Langer Cohen has argued, this miniature of the judge's corpse, taken in the dark parlor of the house, raises several questions, since "[n]o daguerreotypist using natural means could have produced such an image in the setting Hawthorne describes."⁴⁷ For Cohen, this confirms beyond doubt that Holgrave's photographs must be considered as works of magic. In any case, the postmortem portrait is, problematically, supposed to prove that Judge Pyncheon died of natural causes and that Clifford, who was once accused of murdering a relative who had died the same death, was therefore innocent. This – not entirely convincing – argument paves the way for the hurried resolution of the conflict in the unsatisfactory final chapter of the book, in which a symbolic reconciliation between the two enemy families is achieved in the form of Holgrave and Phoebe's marriage.

All the while, however, Holgrave's pictures do not possess the technologically granted objectivity that many contemporary daguerreotypists claimed for their work. Whereas early theorists of photography asserted that in the daguerreotypic process, human agency was transferred to the sun (nature reproducing itself through light), Hawthorne emphasizes that Holgrave does not play a merely passive role. "I misuse Heaven's blessed sunshine by tracing out human features, through its agency" (391), Holgrave explains early in the novel. By using the personal pronoun "I," Holgrave makes it clear that *he* controls the process of daguerreotypic reproduction. The sun may have "agency," but it is no longer the "all-powerful agent" evoked by Jules Janin. For, as Holgrave phrases it, it is he who uses the sun's agency.

The notion of "objects delineating themselves" in an auto-mimesis of nature is thus countered by the image of a manipulative photographer endowed with magical prowess. In Hawthorne's novel, it is not the work of the sunlight alone which produces the said photographic effects, but also the work of an artist using the medium in a specific way and to a particular purpose. The novel leaves one uncertain about the exact role of mesmeric daguerreotypy: in the end, it may help to exorcize the ancestral ghosts determining the fates of two families, but had it not artificially produced and (re-)activated them in the first place?

Hawthorne's preface to the novel famously identifies it as a romance. In his introductory comments, Hawthorne presents a romantic version of the

⁴⁷ Cohen, "What's Wrong with this Picture?," 40.

photographic metaphor discussed at the beginning of this paper. Novels, he explains, are "presumed to aim at a very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man's experience" (351). In other words: they fulfill the Aristotelian principle of probability and necessity; they do not historiographically record the "real," but create plots that are "possible in reality."⁴⁸ The romance, by contrast, can take greater liberties:

[...] while, as a work of art, it must rigidly subject itself to laws, and while it sins unpardonably, so far as it may swerve aside from the truth of the human heart – has fairly a right to present that truth under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer's own choosing or creation. If he think fit, also, he may so manage his atmospherical medium as to bring out or mellow the lights and deepen and enrich the shadows of the picture.

(351)

Hawthorne here employs words that were frequently used to refer both to photography and mesmerism ("atmospherical medium"). The writing of romances, he explains, is simultaneously mimetic and manipulative, for it is committed to the truth of the human heart, but may – metaphorically speaking – change the contrasts. Hence romance, like the mesmeric daguerreotype of Judge Pyncheon, represents not surface truths but the interior truth beneath the surface, a truth, however, that is the result of an obscure modification of reality. For this "truth," there is no objective evidence. The reader of Hawthorne's romance, like the viewer of Holgrave's daguerreotypes, has to entirely rely on the visionary capabilities of the artist.

By characterizing romance as a photo-fantastic mode of writing, Hawthorne's novel establishes an alternative to photorealism, an alternative overlooked not only by Robert Louis Stevenson in his essay "Notes on Realism," but also by many authors and critics who followed him.

⁴⁸ I here refer to the famous passage in *The Poetics* according to which "the function of the poet is not to say what *has* happened, but to say the kind of thing that *would* happen, i.e. what is possible in accordance with probability or necessity." Aristotle, *The Poetics*, trans. Malcolm Heath (London: Penguin, 1996), 16.